

MEETING A NIGHT ATTACK ON THE FIRST LINE TRENCHES



The field kitchens are busy all the time, for whatever the fortunes of the day the men must eat just the same.

The mess call is a welcome sound to these men, who have just come in from the first line trenches.

A Deafening Crash of Sound Breaks In on the Quiet Home Life of the Dugouts, Death Enters, and Then the Tense Blind Struggle in the Crumbling Labyrinth

A line or two in an official communique tells of an attack at night on a portion of the French trenches, but gives no idea of what really happens. The American newspaper man who determined to see the war as it is at the front and who won the French War Cross while doing it fills in some of the details missing in the official account in the following article. He gives the reader a clear idea of just what happens to the individual soldier in such fighting as is now going on about Verdun.

By WILLIAM T. MARTIN.

THE high keyed strain of expectancy among the soldiers during the heavy, tense fighting of the recent months seems to be over, and there is apparent relief among the various regiments of the sector. For the past few weeks there have been no attacks to speak of in the trenches and word repeatedly goes around the fighting in these parts is finished for the winter.

The soldiers here are of the crack regiments of France. They are young men, clean cut and cultured, hailing from Paris and the north. With the long lull in the fighting the set lives in their drawn faces lessen in depth, redness creeps into their cheeks and they are beginning to take life after the easier manner of former days. With long experience at the front they have gradually added what comforts are possible to their quarters in town and the trenches and are settling down for the winter.

As the soldiers swarm the street of the little front village preparing for the supper hour the scene is almost domestic. One notes occasional laughter and singing, a tune here and there with the mood nature of comrades, frequent playing of jokes upon unsuspecting victims and the assembling of tin plates, canteens and cups. Appetizing odors come up from large quantities of steaming broth at the soup kitchens—large wagons drawn up on the side of the road—while the cooks sit at small tables of provender, grand coffee and busy themselves generally. Nobody minds the rain.

Shells still shriek into town occasionally, killing and maiming. But the men judge things by comparison. On the other side of the woods overlooking the village in a certain section of the first line, half a dozen soldiers are being relieved from their six hours' garrison duty. Sergeant Poirot, a medium sized, stocky, merry man with a twinkle in his eye and a beard that attacks out over his chest, is there and accompanies his men back some distance through a connecting trench.

He wears three decorations and is called "the invincible" in the regiment. Before a hole in the side of the trench near the bottom he stops, pulls open something and one by one the men enter. Inside, they fasten a candle on the butt end of a bayonet. They stick the bayonet into the ground in the center and gather around the flickering light to await supper. It is brought up presently from the soup kitchens, some one passing through the opening a pot that steams with a good smell in the cool air of the evening. The men are hungry and with the eagerness of children place the pot in the center and lose no time in doing out the contents.

This evening it is a thick mess of boiled potatoes and carrots with enough chunks of meat to go around. Another receptacle comes in with the "juice," heavy, black coffee, slopping over a large canvas bucket that folds up when it is not in service, and the men start their supper.

They are in good humor. There had been little activity all day. In the early part of the afternoon several mines came over and tore open vast holes some distance down the line, killing two and injuring several of another regiment. A few grenades fell about, doing little damage.

"Blonet was hit today," the sergeant says, "but the turn. It was a grenade and the flare caught him in the face. Poor boy, he has lost his eyes. I guess we got the pig of a German, for we emptied a whole box and slung them over so fast he hadn't time to run."

Two of the men know Blonet. One was at the same law school down in Paris and back in town they kept together much of the time, for they had corresponding leaves. For some time this throws a gloom over the party.

"The war—when will it finish?" they say. "Another winter? Bah!"

Some time later darkness has set in and the supper is finished. The men clean the tin plates and spoons with chunks of the heavy military bread, and folding up their knives put them back into their pockets. They close the door to secure themselves from the ears of the enemy and some one starts to sing softly as they sip the red wine from the blue flannel covered canteens.

"I know That You Are Beautiful," he sings, and soon every one joins in. The sergeant has a remarkable tenor. In former days he sang at the Madeleine in Paris. There is a good bass and they sing well with the quick, soft melody of French music. One of the soldiers has a Jew's harp. It is a happy group in the snug little place measuring only a few feet each way. With the means at their disposal the men have fitted it up so that it is as homelike as possible.

Hung over wooden pegs driven into the earthen walls are their steel helmets. There are also a soldier's cap, several canteens and a picture out of a magazine of an English soldier in noble uniform walking through a trench with a cane. At its side is a picture of a French soldier.

All of the men wear the War Cross. These their number are all that remain of the once gallant company of 200 men. They are veterans, these soldiers, who were in the thick of the hot, bloody months of the past summer and autumn when death or injury to every man seemed only a question of days, oftentimes hours. It was when they were advancing, inch by inch, to the present position here. It is a place of vantage, so coveted by both sides that thousands paid their lives for its possession, and now, after months of fighting, the French overlook the German positions from the top of a slight hill.

They are too well fortified to be driven back again, they say, confident and satisfied. Looking back over the fearfully torn stretches, vast, yawning holes, uncountable splinters of things and burst shells, marked here and there by the semblance of former trenches that have been blown apart and blown in again, one pictures a wake of graveyard. They make shadows for the way young fellows who marched up in their turn, and with them are incredible stories, milder than the imagination could frame, that will possibly never be told. Every turn in the trenches now brings memories to the remaining ones.

Those in the dugout are off duty for the next six hours. They will spend another hour talking and then they will go to bed to get some rest before taking up their watch again at midnight. The chill of the rainy night penetrates into the place, but they mind it not. They are well clad this winter with heavy waistcoats of sheepskin, good, long overcoats and boots that come near the tops. It is much better than last winter.

Things remain quiet along the lines as far as they can hear. Once in a while there is a sharp crack of a rifle as some soldier near by fires in the direction of the enemy's trench to break the monotony. It is almost invariably followed by a shot or so, a reply from the enemy to show they are on the lookout. Some distance away there is a sharp, tearing report as a grenade explodes and a moment later a muffled report as some French soldier sends over a grenade into a German trench. Once there was a deep rumble as a mine was probably set off. But it was out of the sector and so far away that it sounded like distant thunder.

As the men talk the 75s on the hill at the far end of the town in the rear open up for several seconds and the soldiers, knowing, listen for the swish and crash of the shells exploding in the German lines. But the shells shriek by overhead and their crashes

as they explode are not heard. It must be that they are bombarding some town far over on the other side. Poirot and two of the men prepare to go to bed where they are. The others rise to stooping positions and squeeze out to a dugout of their own. Those remaining lie down on the straw litters with their clothes on. The straw is strewn thickly over some boards on the ground and is held together in the form of beds by narrow boards along the sides. Poirot blows out the candle and the place is in darkness.

Back in the town darkness has set in without wounded and the "postes de secours" of the various regiments along the street are empty, save for a few sick soldiers who are being held over until the light of the early morning. Except for occasional dark forms that plop by and the drawn-out incessant rum dum of the ravitaillement unloading at the far end of the road in the direction of the rear the place seems deserted. There is not the flicker of a light anywhere. But the carefully closed doors along the sides are full of soldiers who laugh and joke as they sip their wine. They are back from the trenches for the brief periodic rests.

Soldiers in their quarters are suddenly startled by several deep resonant crashes that shake the houses. Instantly follow more crashes that rend and tear their hundreds of them, and the whole town shakes.

Some remain where they are, looking askance; others rush into the street. There they look over the hill and in a continuation of flashes that glare into the night it seems to be burning up with dull, subdued flames. It is a fearful sight. Everything is shaken by the crashes that lose individuality in great waves of sound, and it seems for several minutes as though all the guns of the German army were being directed at the hill at one time. Then, as suddenly, the noise ceases, and everything seems as peaceful as before. Their own guns are silent. The soldiers stand there and wonder in their bewilderment.

Up in the trenches Poirot and his two comrades are still in their dugout. They are alive, but they hardly know it. Two of the men silently lie across each other and another is stretched out with his face in a corner on the other side. Finally, the men slowly move, turn over several times, and sit up. Then with a sudden realization of what has happened they instantly become very much alive. Poirot dashes through the door and the two follow.

Outside, the sergeant stumbles into a hole and falls on his face. He picks himself up, blinded by dense smoke, and choking through it, feels his way in the direction of the first line. He stumbles over the holes, heaps of debris and bodies. The whole landscape has changed. It can't be that such has been the work of a few minutes, he thinks. He has never experienced anything like this.

Every second or so the world fills with shocking things that tear and crash in back, in front, along the sides. He is thrown on his face and grovels through the ditches blinded, as everything fills with broken, torn and twisted things that fly through the air with each crash. But he is still alive and, groveling along, as sections of the trench he has just passed over are filled up or are torn apart he experiences a sense of exultation as though he has suddenly become superhuman.

He has lost the sense of direction. To regain it by the ray of the ditches is impossible. He therefore follows a steady, crackling sound in front. It is a machine gun, and he knows there is life in the first line. He knows subconsciously that the Germans must be coming over the trenches.

He is in the first line and right ahead is the thing that poisons away like a pneumatic riveter, only faster, louder, it seems. He is standing up now and making his way along as he can. The trench is filled with dead soldiers and he seems to be the only one alive.

Around a bend, due into the wall of the trench with a roof still remaining, he sees the sun, or the soldiers operating it, for the place is hazy with smoke. Speaking is impossible, but he



French gunners using a captured German machine gun.

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catches the face of the lookout who has just turned away from the little hole looking out over the trenches and he knows they are coming in great numbers. The gun spits away with an occasional brief interruption to change barrels as they become hot and are set in against the side of the trench to cool.

The sergeant starts away. He has his bearings now and at a little place dug into the ground, some distance down the line, he stoops and feels around. He comes up with long things in his hand. One he sets in a sort of mortar on the other side of the trench and pulls a string. The thing swishes up and high in the air overhead, comes down on. Their guns now rain a continually breaks into a great, crackling fire line on the advancing German.



Supper back of the third line trenches.

Through the columns of smoke, flashes of fire and in the greenish glare of the rockets he sees a huge wave of something that presses onward. In the consciousness of the individuality of the trench and raises his head over the parapet. No one thinks of injury or death.

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Crumpled by Machine Gunfire, Blinded by Gas, Seared With Liquid Flame, the French Fall Back, Thousands Die, and a Few Yards of Trench Are Gained

The sergeant gives commands here and there as things adjust themselves and the men begin to realize what has happened. He hears other machine guns start up and he encourages the Germans will have a hard time of it. Shells fall in and about the trenches, blowing the men to pieces. But now there is a dash of men.

In certain moments first in back of the first line men are lying on their stomachs shouting messages in telephonic tones to their batteries in the rear. Others stand in the first line, some looking through holes, some with heads half above the parapet, shouting orders into receivers, and the range is up and high in the air overhead, comes down on. Their guns now rain a continually breaks into a great, crackling fire line on the advancing German.



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The sergeant feels it in the form of the spray that strikes into his clothes and fills the trench, everything in it, and shells like gasoline. Now there are the German throw over little one that burst into flame in the trench.

Instantly flames leap from all quarters. The trench is burning up. The flames dart along in the direction of the sergeant at almost incredible speed and he runs before them. In a few moments he is alone. He has no time to follow the flames who run too, human bodies shrieking in agony. At first these numbers are legion, but they drop behind, and now only half a dozen men are left untroubled run before.



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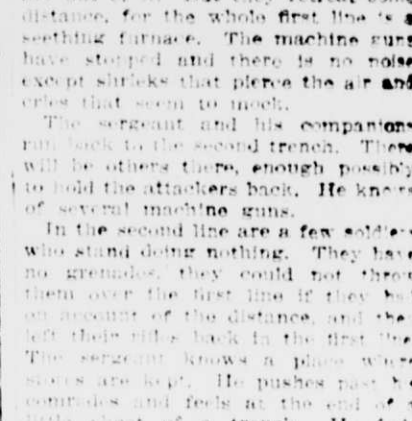
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